COVER SHEET

Performing Difference: Young Adult Fiction Post September 11

Jo Lampert

81 Rockbourne Terrace

Paddington Queensland 4064

j.lampert@qut.edu.au

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> *One of the most famous and important buildings in America is on fire with thousands of people inside, and no-one can tell me what is happening or why this should have happened. Then as news unfolds and more things happen, everything just gets worse and worse. Both of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre have collapsed, with who knows how many people inside and another plane crashed outside Pittsburg. There is one thing for certain. The whole world has just changed. It is a turning point for history.*
> *Girl_X*
> *(Rowe 2001, p.152)*

In the days after September 11, 2001, as we watched our televisions and listened to our radios, as we scanned the Internet and answered our telephones there was a general buzz in the Western world as we agreed that nothing would ever be the same again. Yet this statement leads us no closer to understanding how this might be so. In what ways precisely do we now live in a world different from the one we inhabited before the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, and The Pentagon in Washington? Nonetheless, if it is true that the world is now altered this should logically be reflected in all that the West produces and in how it distributes knowledge. This would include the young adult literature written and published since September 11th.

This paper explores some of this new fiction, and examines in what ways attitudes, particularly towards race and culture, luck and capitalism, and victims and saviour are constructed in the recently emerging works, and whether or not already existing attitudes continue or are disrupted. The phrase " the whole world has just changed" may be present in what we read, and on the lips of many, but a critical reading of texts suggests a much more complex reality.

It is clearly too early to predict how the 'War Against Terror' will find its way into young adult fiction, or how ideas of nation and citizenship will change. But the number of books published in the last year that directly or indirectly address themes of race and racism, and more specifically the Arab world, the Taliban and the events of September 11 allow us to begin to examine developing trends. This paper will consider three of the recently published books about the Afghan war, since our reading of these is influenced by the events of September 11.

These books, *Parvana, My Forbidden Face: Growing up Under the Taliban* and *In the Hands of the Taliban* have all been published in the last year. I also include the Australian book *girl x-recreated,* directly relevant because it makes reference to September 11, the events of which disrupted the writing of the book. *Girl x-recreated* was compiled by a social worker who asked a group of teenagers to write a fictionalised e-mail diary to a boy of the future, and in the process of writing the text, the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon were attacked. Other books, like *Sarindi and the Lucky Bird, Have Courage, Hazel Green!* and *Tracking the Dalai Lama* have been included in this discussion, though they are less obviously related, not being about the Arab world or the events of September 11. However, since they hold as their primary goal lessons in race and racism, they cannot help but be read now in a new light. It is useful, too, to look at one specific Australian book written before September 11th, *Jihad,* a young adult novel set amidst the conflict in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Through these books, it is possible to track the on-going and increasing responses to the very question asked here: whether we can see the specific ways in which the world has or has not changed in the recent young adult books, as well as in discussions *about* children's literature found on discussion groups on the Internet, on Web Sites and in the popular press.

Writers almost immediately responded to September 11, and began to discuss how their writing might be affected, with general agreement at literary festivals and other forums that although they weren't certain of how exactly this would be so, their own writing would almost certainly be shifted by current events. At the Brisbane Writers Festival in October 2001, this was a theme, and Thomas Keneally and Michael Ondaatje, at a literary event held in Sydney in July 2002 both said their writing would almost certainly be influenced, in ways as yet unclear to them, by the events. Writers of children's fiction have responded, too. Daniel Handler, who writers under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket, posted a message on a children's literature discussion group saying:

> *My young readers are not only finding a diversion in the melodrama of the Baudelaire's lives, but they are also finding ways of contemplating our current troubles through stories. The secret passageways, sinister reptiles and nefarious disguises in my books seem a far cry from the real world, but when children write to me asking if Count Olaf were a terrorist, if the Baudelaires were anywhere near the World Trade Centre, if the unnamed country where the books are set is in danger of being bombed, it is clear they are struggling with the same issues as the rest of us.*

(Handler 2002)

Annick Press, a leading Canadian children's book publisher, soon after September 11 posted this response on their web site:

> *Childhood is changing and the world we live in faces crises unknown to previous generations. Many children live with adults who despair over these difficulties and struggle to cope. It takes great energy and faith to help children evolve into confident, capable adults. The books published by Annick Press mirror reality honestly, reassure and support and build self-esteem. They share fantasy and stimulate imagination, while encouraging children to trust their own judgment and abilities. They try to give children faith in their own and the world's survival.*
>
> (Annick Press 2002)

Contemporary fiction is writing our history for us as we watch, and will provide us in future with a deeper understanding of the ways the literature of our times have illustrated a struggle for the hearts and minds of our children. Predictions have been made that alongside novels dealing with current, topical issues, we will also see a resurgence of historical young adult fiction. Since historical fiction can be seen as a site where contemporary values are constructed, and where the reader can develop understandings about his/her own current worldview, this seems like a logical trend to look out for. Placing issues in history can safely provide the reader with distance from 'real life', and where, in fact, we might see new ideologies in construct. Neubauer says, for instance, that historical fiction can provide 'ideological justification for both past and present' [Neubauer, 2001 2). Stephens, more idealistically, believes that historical fiction is an area where children's literature can be 'radically ideological: "While historical fiction is essentially a realist genre, it also has a pervasive need to make the discourse 'strange' [Stephens, 1992 202]. One wonders in these turbulent times whether we will see an increase in historical young adult fiction, harkening back, for instance, to previous wars. Linda Sue Park, the winner of 2002's Newbery Award for her novel *A Single Shard*, has suggested this is already true in the article *Finding Comfort in Books*. Of her new young adult novel, *When my Name was Keoko,* Park says, "At the time when I wrote it, that was just a World War 11 thing, and suicide pilots had not been heard of since. All of a sudden now, when I talk booktalk with kids and ask them if they know what a Kamikaze pilot is, unfortunately, they do know what it means" (2002 2). Giroux [2002 2] also

discusses the fact that since Sept 11, the dominant press often refer back to World War 11 “invoking daily the symbols of revenge, retaliation, and war”.

The ideological shifts that may become apparent are not yet entirely clear, though there was a sense amongst the left (Said 2002; Giroux 2002) that after September 11 the West would make clear divisions between good and evil. Edward Said, for example, anticipates a re-emergence of stereotyped, superficially drawn divisions between those in the right (aka Americans) and those in the wrong (Islam). In a recent essay he suggests that ‘we have all succumbed to the promiscuous misuse of language and sense, by which everything we don’t like becomes terror and what we do is pure and simple and good ’(2002, p.2). Although Arabic men in the new books are described as threatening and leering, these stereotypes were even more blatant and obvious in the pre-September 11 book *Jihad*. There, Afghanis ‘laugh with an evil sound’ (Hawke, p.70), have ‘evil smelling breath and the matted remains of dinner on (their) black beards’ (p.187), have voices that ‘rose up like genie(s) in a bottle’ (p.211) and are like ‘Aladdin on a magic rug’ (p. 77). In truth, less of this demonising is apparent in *Parvana,* and *My Forbidden Face.* There appears to be some commitment on the part of writers to assist in cultural understanding rather than inflame hatred, a commitment to social justice suggested by Deborah Ellis’s dedication of *Parvana* to ‘the children of war’. In general, Afghani women and children are seen as innocent victims, rather than perpetrators of evil. The new texts are generally ‘liberal’, permeated still with issues of equality and social justice, and so the texts attempt to balance ‘civil liberties and national security, fear and reason, compassion and anger’ (Giroux 2002, p.5).

This compassion towards the women and children of the Arab world (if not Islam) is also reflected in an increased visibility of children as innocent spokespeople in politics and in the media, so Parvana, as a young girl, becomes the most credible voice of oppression; the one to listen to. This belief that certain sub-groups of the enemy are victims themselves works well in its reinforcement of the West as protector and saviour. Male members of the Taliban, however, are almost always depicted as the enemy; men without individual faces. They are portrayed collectively as ‘illiterate thugs’ (Ellis, 2002, p.33). In both *Parvana* and *My*

Forbidden Face, chapters are devoted to watching public executions through the gaze of a young Afghani girl. *Parvana* provides the protagonist's running commentary as she watches: 'dogs have started eating some of the bodies, so there were pieces of people on the sidewalks and in the streets. I even saw a dog carrying a person's arm in his mouth' (p.9). In *girl-x recreated*, there is no critical or historical unpacking of the Taliban's behaviour, which is portrayed as a-historical and irrational. For example, the writer of an e-mail tells a boy from the future of the events of September 11th and explains that the Twin Towers were destroyed by the Taliban 'Just like that. With no thought' (Rowe 2002, p.157). The authors demand nothing from their readers beyond registering an emotional response. Fear and pity both are evoked in the recent books, and readers can safely position themselves as superior moral beings in an admittedly complex world, as empathetic saviours and righteous judges without resorting altogether to caricature or stereotype. This is an interesting consequence of the alliances and types of empathy available to us in current times: the ironic manageability of both loathing the enemy and saving a subgroup (the women and children) constructed as abused, oppressed and in need of help from the more liberated West. America's positioning of itself as saviour is strengthened rather than weakened by the events in September 2001. We can name the enemy (who has the face of Osama Bin Ladin) but appease our liberalism by easily identifying the 'good' face of the 'tribe'; that is, the women and children who would be a lot better off if they were just more like 'us'.

Rather than being entirely new, what we see in these texts makes use of stock tropes, such as civilisation versus the wilderness (for instance, in *Tracking the Dalai Lama* where a young girl and her father are asked to go to remote Tibet to save the Dalai Lama because 'fortunately…you still have the outsider's view of Tibet…you're rightly positioned then to judge' (Tolbert 2001, p. 41). Captivity and salvation narratives are also evident in this book, where we find Neuebauer's example of 'the forced removal of the protagonist-narrator away from her English and Christian home and village to the uncivilized and uncolonised wilderness' ([Neubauer, 2001 p.1]). In fact, Jess's father is asked to save the Dalai Lama because he is a journalist (a modern saviour) who works for *Australian Geographic*, and as such is objective, more rationally disposed and trustworthy: 'You are the first non-Tibetans to

be trusted enough to be told about a plan of ours…I'm very impressed with you and your daughter, where you come from and the magazine you are working for" (p. 34).

Particular kinds of historical novels, such as frontier stories are in evidence, too. These become 'instances of affirmation of the American dream, hope or destiny" [Neubauer, 2001 2). Some of the novels emerging are, in essence, frontier stories. In *Tracking the Dalai Lama*, a young Australian girl travels where no one has gone before, to hitherto unknown parts of Burma. Neubauer, in writing of captivity narratives present in frontier stories, describes the protagonists of these books in this way: "Their demonstrations of self-reliance, their personal strength and natural cunning proved particularly convincing in the direct confrontation with the savage natives, recounted in a whole series of narrow escapes from every and all dangers." (2001 2). Toni Morrison sees these stories as particularly American, illustrating "America's fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of absence of so-called civilization, their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal." and sees literature as providing opportunities to "conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities" (Morrison, 1992 37).

Alongside these continuations of familiar narratives, Americans, who might have momentarily become victims, find themselves once again positioned as heroes, which reassuringly allows them to regain control and power. A newer and more complicated theme emerges, however, in the commonly found discourse of the global citizen in the recent texts. In much of this new young adult fiction we find the same sentiments expressed as in this poem from *girl x-recreated*:

> *We think of how many we have lost,*
> *We pray there will be no more*
> *The world is scared and saddened*
> *We all cry as one*
>
> *(p.155)*

This is similar to the message relayed by a Tibetan monk to Jess in *Tracking the Dalai Lama,* who explains to her that they 'share the same heart' (Tolbert, p. 41) and later explains that 'Hospitality, generosity, caring and laughter didn't need a common language' (p.70). This

attempt to find common ground is not unusual in particular kinds of young adult books, for instance historical fiction, which often implies an essential human nature (Stephens 1992). It is also found in *Have Courage, Hazel Green* where we discover that the racist and the victim have more in common (including nationality) than is first believed. Julia Kristeva (1993) sees this *'esprit general'* as a natural attempt to find commonality in difference. However, Stuart Hall in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996, p.6) questions this idea of the 'integral, originary and unified identity'. In the end, this liberal, humanitarian idea that we are all the same under the skin (also visually represented in a drawing in *girl x-recreated* of a teenaged girl with half a black face and half a white face), is less evident in more critical readings of the texts, where we are faced with more Othering than these other examples would suggest. It's partially the 'we' who are all the same that needs examination. Our hearts may be the same, but they aren't all equal. For Jess, in *Tracking the Dalai Lama* it is confirmed that as an Australian she is superior morally and rationally. In *Parvana*, where all the characters are Afghani, the father is presented as educated and morally superior to other Afghani men because he has been schooled in Britain and speaks English. Parvana and her friend fantasize about their ultimate desire to move to the West. In *Seducing Mr. McLean (* Haikal 2002*)*, a book not necessarily intended for young adults, but with a young Australian/Middle Eastern protagonist, the main character knows she must 'become' more like her fellow Australian students. Her attempts to do this (including changing her manner of dress and allowing men to grope her in ways she finds culturally horrifying) are presented with wry humour. In addition, the 'we' referred to in these books is clearly American now, regardless of whether the book was in fact written by a Canadian (Ellis) or an Australian (Tolbert, Haikal, Fraser and Gamble, Rowe). *In girl x-recreated*, an Australian book, one of the young women who writes email is sitting in an American History class when she hears of the planes crash (Rowe 2002, p.152) and says that she now cries when she hears the American Anthem. In *Parvana* one could argue that despite being Afghani the girls behave and speak more like Americans. 'She's a stuck-up snob' says Parvana's sister Nooria, who 'flips her hair back' (Ellis 2002, p.26). In fact, the Afghani girls in these books seem oddly ignorant of their own country's history and cultures. Parvana admits to 'finding it all very confusing' and cannot figure out how women can see in their burqas (p. 16). Later, her father makes the unlikely suggestion that ''After the Soviets

left, the people who had been shooting at the Soviets decided they wanted to keep shooting at something, so they shot at each other' (p.16) and suggesting that 'Maybe someone should drop a big bomb on the country and start again (p.140). Though young people are asked to believe all people are the same 'under the skin' (Rowe 2001), all of the characters in these books perform as Americans.

A dominant theme in the books examined in this paper is that of luck. We become increasingly sentimental about our freedom and our 'lucky lives'. Westerners are lucky in everything, including love. Many of the books refer to arranged marriage as barbaric examples of the oppression of women, and describe Arabic men as doing ' disgusting and degrading things' (Hawke 1996, p. 53). We should also feel lucky that we come from democracies, where we are benefit from economic freedom. This, of course, nicely confirms the 'lucky country' image coveted in Australia, and allows young readers to compare their lives with the less fortunate lives of children in 'inferior' nations. In *Jihad*, Jaime, who was mostly raised in Afghanistan, realises that she only matured and became enlightened when she moved for a year to Australia, and 'learned everyone should have a fair go, and violence wasn't the way to get what you wanted' (p.26). The luck inherent in being Christian is apparent in *Parvana*, when her father, educated in Britain, says, 'religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings, how to be kinder. But the Taliban are not making Afghanistan a kinder place to live' (p.16). Parvana herself feels lucky when she finds a way to make money at the market. Jess, *in Tracking the Dalai Lama,* recovers from seeing her best friend raped and murdered when she goes to Tibet and realises just how lucky she is. Girl-x writes, 'I realise how lucky I am to have my freedom' (Rowe 2002, p. 179). Immigrants are lucky, too. In the non-fiction book *Australia's Peoples: An Immigration History of Australia* (2001) a short section is devoted to refugees, but there is no mention of detention centres, or of the difficulties refugees might face upon arrival. It will be interesting to see what fiction emerges since the 'child overboard' scandal or the investigations into human rights in detention centres.

Luck, for the Indonesian family in Sarindi *and The Lucky Bird* comes when they begin to cater for the tourist market by driving a *becak* for Westerners at a large hotel. Wealth and the ability to participate in commerce and participate in capitalism are very much part of this discourse of luck. Giroux suggests that profit making is now constructed as the essence of democracy (2002), and this is evident in several of these books. The novel *Parvana* revolves around the story of a middle class family who now live in poverty under the Taliban's rule, and the young girl's illicit attempts to earn money for her family, dressed as a boy in a world where girls are restricted from all freedoms. Our primary sympathy for this family comes from its loss of middle-class status. Parvana's dangerous and illicit transformation into a breadwinner gives her heroic status, and the ideology of capitalism is rewarded when her friend comes up with a plan. Shauzia, another girl who is disguised as a boy to gain freedom (in her case not only economic, but to escape an arranged marriage) suggests, in Western vernacular, 'Hey, maybe if we work together, we can come up with a better way to make money' (p.100). In *Tracking the Dalai Lama*, explored here not as a book directly about the Arab world, but as a book significant in its explorations of race and culture, the desire isn't only for a better economy, but for the language of democracy, English. Sawree, the driver who puts himself in danger by chaperoning Jess and her father through Tibet, admits (in broken English) that for him and his community, 'English like food. We very hungry for it' (p. 21). Since Westerners hold positions of power and status because of their economy and language, it allows them the right to a gaze that is entirely taken for granted as natural in these texts. In *Tracking the Dalai Lama,* Jess is given literal licence to 'gaze' through binoculars at both Tibetans and Chinese characters in the book and for her father to decide to write not only a magazine article, but in the end a book about The Dalai Lama because, as he proudly says, he's 'studied it a bit' (p.24).

A natural consequence of feeling lucky is both pity and empathy for those who are perceived to be less lucky. When girl-x writes that she 'feels so much pain for those suffering' (p. 188) and when Jaime in Jihad 'feels weepy at the injustice of it all' (p. 11), this not only confirms a role of benevolent charity, but likely also reflects the genuine impulse on the part of young people for what is called 'world peace'. In a positive reading of this impulse, young adults are

at the right developmental stage of idealism to want to 'save the world' (Appleyard 1990, p.96). Girl-x expresses an impulse that in our culture is given high moral currency when she writes, ' I feel so much pain for those suffering in Afghanistan at the moment, and I feel restless just sitting here doing absolutely nothing about it' (p. 188).

Luck is clearly desirable as expressed, for instance, by Parvana who dreams of what we have in the West when she says, 'I just want a normal, boring life' (p.140). The politics of envy though, is complicated in these texts. In some respects, those from other cultures want what we have, and we, in a more complicated turn, want what they have; more exciting (albeit dangerous) lives. Jaime, in *Jihad,* expresses this when she reflects, ' I realised what I'd missed the most about the place while I was in Australia. It was that old magic, the unpredictable atmosphere that ancient lands of legend like Pakistan seem to have…' Although kidnapped and placed in mortal danger in the novel, she is made excited by the thought of 'a wild and lawless place like Peshawar' (p. 62). *girl-x,* too, 'feels restless' (p. 188) and although on the one hand she just wants things to get back to their normal, boring everyday routine, she later acknowledges that she watches the events of September 11 unfolding on TV precisely because it IS 'the lure of something different' (p.152). Mike Hill, in *A Whiteness Reader* (1997), describes this complex state of loathing/desire when he refers to this culture envy; we can both revile other cultures and desire their exoticism at the same time. The seductive covers of *Jihad, Parvana*, *My Forbidden Face: Growing up Under the Taliban- A Young Woman's Story,* and *In The Hands of the Taliban*, with their almost identical images of young girls eyes peeking out of their burqas, evoke in the reader both superiority and desire.

And so how might this story end? The events of September 11, 2001 are recent, and it will be some time before we can examine what has changed and what has not with any perspective. Indeed, this kind of linear cause-and-effect analysis will never be possible because as Hamilton and McWilliam remind us, 'we cannot assume that change has motivations that are rational, developments that are linear and effects that are cumulative' (2001, p. 18). Instead, as the young character Hazel Green says , we'll have to continue to 'juggle these ideas'

(Hirsch 2001, p. 70). The ambiguous ending of *Parvana,* where the girl and her father leave a war-torn Kabul to search for Parvana's missing mother and sister reflects a general uncertainty about the future apparent in these books. Giroux suggests that we may no longer believe in the happy ending, and predicts that literature will provide us now with 'the mood of widespread pessimism and the cathartic allure of the spectacle' (2002, p.4). Taxel (1997) has wondered whether young adult fiction often responds to a crisis climate, or whether it contributes to it, and this too will be an interesting question to ask in the future. Will there be an increase in escapist fiction? Will writers of young adult fiction articulate 'a problem-posing agenda from which a better social order could emerge' (Hamilton and McWilliam 2001, p. 29)? How will publishers respond to the events of September 11, and what responsibilities will they feel? How will we find this crisis of history resolved in young adult fiction? Young adult fiction published over the next several years will almost certainly reveal both familiar themes used in new ways or for new purposes, and will also shift in ways that can only just begin to be anticipated.

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